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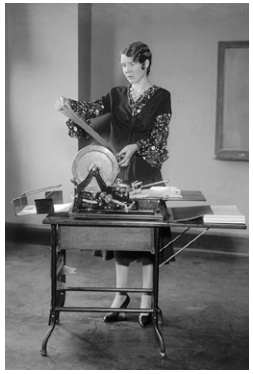
PERFORMING PUBLISHING: FRAGMENTATION, NETWORKS AND CIRCULATION.

FEDEX
Walead Beshty, FedEx Sculptures series, 2005 - present. Standard FedEx boxes containing the same shapes made of glass are shipped to the exhibition site, where the latter are presented on top of the boxes.

The definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution (Marcel Broodthaers quoted in Crow 1996, 177).

The advent of the printing press, which placed exact duplication at the core of publishing, had the side effect of producing the concept of edition[1]. An edition of a book is "one of the differing forms in which a literary work (or a collection of works) is published, either by the author himself, or by subsequent editors". In terms of production, an edition of a work corresponds to "the whole number of copies printed from the same set of types and issued at the same time" ("Edition" 1989). The latter definition shows how such concept is inextricably connected to print as a technology. As Darnton (2007) suggests, it could be possible to trace all the different editions of a book in the form of a flowchart (cfr. 1.2.2). Through the concept of the edition, the idea of a separation between content and form starts to become apparent. In fact, an edition can differ from another one, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of the materiality of the support. A classic example lies in the work of Aldus Manutius who chose the handy octavo format to publish cultural milestones that, until then, were generally printed as intimidating folio editions (Bhaskar 2013, 112).

Before the advent of cheap and widespread duplicating technologies such as the hectograph or the mimeograph, the proliferation of diverse editions was mostly limited to successful or popular books that were not only officially reprinted in different formats, but also pirated, ripped off, sent as excerpts and finally offered as cheaper artifacts. Networked digital technology had an impact on the duplication, reconfiguration, and distribution of texts in terms of scale and speed. To get a glimpse of such impact, it's sufficient to consider that each time that a webpage is loaded by the



MIMEOGRAPH
Woman using a mimeograph machine. Picture taken 1905 and 1945 by Harris & Ewing.

browser, a copy of it on a local computer is made, thus the duplication cost of a text is close to zero. Similarly, digital networks have shaken the concept of edition: is every revision to a print on demand book to be considered a different edition? Shall every instance of text require its own ISBN code? The fluid threshold between version and edition touches upon the very concept of publication. In pre-digital publishing, the difference between version and edition lied in the state of a publication: a modified instance of a text that is not published would be a version of it, while a published one would be an edition. Networked digital media allow to revise a text after it was published, maintaining the same identification (permalink, ISBN, etc). Furthermore, daily tools like the copy and paste, common files formats, and HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) simplify the process of copying a text or part of it, while reframing it in a peculiar environment. Such recontextualizations have also been automated: for instance RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication) technology, first developed in 1999, allows to 'absorb' content from disparate sources and then organize it in a linear flow (Guha 1999). Likewise, the logic of reblog, first implemented as an open-source tool developed at the art and technology center Eyebeam[2], allows, at the press of a button, to make an identical copy of the chosen content on an owned platform.

As a result of this immediacy, we could perceive a shift from distribution to circulation, being the former an activity carried out by the publisher and the latter a quasi-autonomous process in which is the work itself that travels thanks to the simultaneous effort of users and softwares. Circulation has profound effects on the content itself. In this section, I'll discuss the work of artists and designers who take advantage of it, considering "context [as] the new content" (Goldsmith 2011). Some of these practitioners reflect upon the processes of circulation and reframing through writing and adopt them with the goal of spreading their message.

NETWORKED EFFECTS

In his essay “Dispersion”, Israel-born artist Seth Price (2002), drawing from Conceptual to Public art, discusses the implication of artworks’ dispersion in the public sphere referring to “framing and context, and constantly renegotiating its relationship to its audience” as the privileged strategy of contemporary art. He focuses the consequences of releasing work through a system of distributed media, defined as “social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazines, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data diskettes” (Price 2002, 7). Price’s notion of distributed media is able to bind several kind of supports, devices, and fields of action according to the way they act as node in a network and the way they contribute to circulation.

DISPERSION
Dispersion’s Ukraine Art Student Bootleg, 2006.

This focus on distribution is intimately bound to the notion of public, which cannot be perceived anymore as a single static entity, but instead as “simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture, knit together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion and discussion” (Price 2002, 10). Price wonders whether this distribution through reproduction adds value to the works it becomes exponentially more accessible. As examples of the potential of distribution, the author mentions a video form 2002 by a Pakistani fundamentalist group who kidnapped and then murdered the journalist Daniel Pearl[3], and Linux, an open-source operating system developed concurrently by programmers all over the world. In their incommensurable difference, they both take advantage of distribution, circulation, and proliferation in networked digital environments. These processes augment their resiliency and fluidity. Of course, the internet acts as the medium that enhances such reproducibility and boosts the echo effect.

In Price’s (2002, 13) words, “with more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing materials. Anything on the internet is a fragment, provisional, pointing elsewhere. Nothing is finished. What a time you chose to be born!” Price himself puts in practice this idea of distribution, by providing his essays online for free as PDFs, and keeping a loose track of the proliferating versions.

Paul Soulellis is an artist and a graphic designer from US. Furthermore, he’s a a member of the Artists’ Books Cooperative (ABC)[4], an international network of book artists. In 2013, Soulellis initiated the Library of the Printed Web[5], a collection of works in which content from the Web undergoes a process of “transduction” (Ludovico 2014) to printed matter (cfr. 3.3). Soulellis indicates four different tactics through which artists and designers carry out this transformation: grabbing; scraping; hunting; performing (cfr. Soulellis 2013).

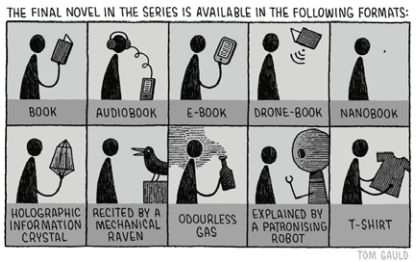
Grabbing and scraping consist in simply appropriating — respectively manually or automatically — material from the Web in bulk. Hunting is a more selective process in which the exception is what counts. Finally, performing consists in “acting out [a] procedure, in a narrative fashion [...] The procedure is a way to interact with data and a kind of performance between web and print—the end result being the printed work itself”.

Borrowing from Marcel Duchamp, the author describes the state of difference between print and online as an “infrathin”, a sort of indifferent difference, difficult to pinpoint but yet present. The physical objects derived from this process still keep the traces of the digital network from which they come from. As Soulellis argues, this can be seen as a general condition of our times: “the networked condition pushes itself offline, beyond its own boundaries”, recognizing the indirect effects of digitalization (Soulellis 2014).

PRINTING OUT THE INTERNET
Kenneth Goldsmith on top of the printed matter arrived to Mexico City for Printing out the Internet, 2013. Source: http://printingtheinternet.tumblr.com/post/56572102624/we-printed-the-fucking-internet.

Performing publishing, according to Soulellis, is the ability and the willingness to take advantage of "versioning", by triggering "the array of possibilities that amplifies and expands along the network". This movement produces an uncertainty about the original, because every reframing adds a certain 'charge' to the work and therefore makes something new out of it. No transposition is neutral, both qualitatively and quantitatively. In Soulellis' (2014) words, "each of these frames brings its own context, with its own social and political implications". Employing Bhaskar terminology, we could say that each frame brings in its model and 'sews it up' around content (cfr. 1.3).

Printing the work doesn't interrupt this process. As a demonstration, Soulellis mentions Kenneth Goldsmith's project Printing out the Internet[6]. In May of 2013, US poet and writer Kenneth Goldsmith launched a call to "participate in the first-ever attempt to print out the entire internet." Participants were asked to print a portion of the Web they considered particularly relevant, and send it to Mexico City. The printed matter was then categorized and exhibited as an untidy accumulation of paper. Although the performance — an homage to Aaron Swartz, an activist who fought for freedom of information — addressed a shift from the Web to the physical world, the project mostly lived online, as interviews to the artist and installation shoots published on mainstream news sites like the Washington Post or reblogged on personal blogs. Performing publishing differs from spreading content to as many platform as possible, which can be expressed in technical terms by the COPE motto (Create Once Publish Everywhere) (cfr. 1.1). Conversely, performing publishing means to design, or at least to consider, the potential chain reactions of the network. The idea of the work is not only expressed by the content, but also by the way it travels and it's reframed: "it is the performance of an idea by distributing it to a networked audience" (Soulellis 2014). Performing publishing means to envision the dialogue or the interplay between frames, and therefore highlight their embedded models. In other words, the publishing process becomes a kind of content in itself. Soulellis concludes his essay by advocating seamlessness, automatic processes, and continuous replication enhancing the potential of publishing as a performance.



GAULD
Tom Gauld, The Final Novel in the Series Is Available in the Following Formats, 2014. Source: http://myjetpack.tumblr.com/post/102724574725/my-book-of-cartoons-youre-all-just-jealous-of-my.

In 2009, Daniel Van der Velden from the Dutch design group Metahaven, together with Henrik van Leeuwen, Femke Herregraven, Nina Støttrup Larsen, Rozemarijn Koopmans, and Kees de Klein took part in a two-days workshop at the Dutch Architecture Institute entitled The Netbook and Its Library. The premise of the workshop was to consider the library not as a physical warehouse but as a network, an abstract array of relationships between texts. To express such idea, the group set itself to reprint on a 1 to 1 scale a well-known book — in this case The Rise of the Network Society by Manuel Castells — by only using

material found on independent and corporate Web repositories (the so-called 'cloud'). In the end three books were produced, all deriving from The Rise of the Network Society. These were defined netbooks: "A netbook describes how a single book exists on the net, distributed and fragmented in various incarnations and forms. Netbooks are decentralized but coherent networks of knowledge" (Van der Velden et al. 2009).

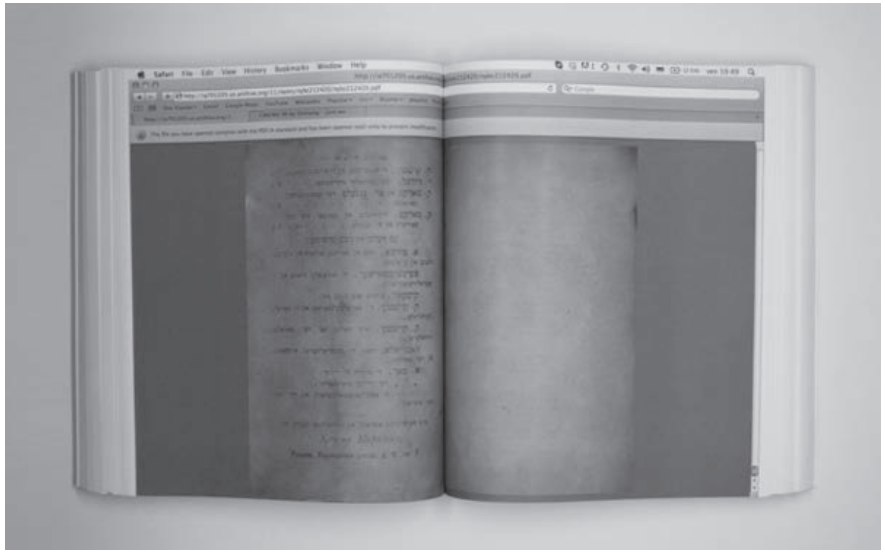
NETBOOKS
The three netbooks produced during The Netbook and Its Library, 2009.

The first netbook in the series is the result of the attempt to reconstruct the content of the original book. This was done by taking screenshots from Google Books, grabbing mobile photos of the book pages from Flickr, downloading images from Amazon, low-res cover from personal websites, etc. The group was able to reconstruct around 68% of the whole book and left black pages in the new version to draw attention to the gaps, highlighting in this way the common assumption according to which the totality of our cultural heritage is digitized and freely accessible on the Internet, a "disillusion of information overload" (van der Velden et al. 2009). The second netbook, entitled The Netbook about the Book, is a collection of quotations, opinions, and reviews of Castells' book that were found online. These, existing in diverse media forms, such as text, audio, and video are placed back in the space of the text they refer to. In this case the cover of the netbook lists the names of the contributors. Finally, the last iteration, entitled The Netbook as Library, attempts to show the locations where the collected materials of the other two netbooks belong, considering both the places in which the materials were produced and the ones in which they were uploaded. Thus, the book includes images of data centers, universities, etc.

After these "book scraping" methods became easier, they were included in exercises in the graphic design department of ArtEZ University in Arnhem, the Netherlands (Støttrup Larsen 2014). Furthermore, a similar workshop entitled iCloud, was run in 2012 by Vinca Kruk from Metahaven at the Free University of Bozen. This time, the books meant to be reconstructed were Das Kapital and The Medium is the Massage[7].

Reflecting on this expanded notion of the book as a dispersed entity, Daniel Van der Velden proposes a shift in the meaning of designing a book in such networked context. In his words, "To design a book may become like the process of coordination required to fine-tune all these online and offline efforts, rather than typesetting pages and creating cover imagery for a paper object" (van der Velden 2011, 156).

In her 2011 installation at Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco entitles Phantoms (H__RT _F D_RKN_SS), Stephanie Syjuco, an artist born in the Philippines and currently based in San Francisco, several versions of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness are presented as paperback books. The ten versions of the novel, that is in the public domain according to US legislation, are downloaded from different online sources, such as Project Gutenberg or the University of Virginia's website.



DAS KAPITAL
A spread from Das Kapital produced by Maddalena Aliprandi, Simone Gatto, Leonardo Azzolini, and Elena Meneghini during the iCloud workshop, 2012. Source: http://www.leonardoazzolini.com/html/das-kapital.html.

PHANTOMS
Phantoms (H__RT _F D_RKN_SS) by Stephanie Syjuco. Partial installation view, 2011.
Source: http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_phantoms.html.

PHANTOMS
An online version of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, 2011. Source: http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_phantoms.html.

Syjuco preserved the paratextual elements of these versions, such as Google Ads or the sites' menu items, as well as mistakes or translation errors. The only text on the cover is the URL from which the text was downloaded. These Print on Demand volumes represent a physical epitome of the effects of digital circulation over the original text. As Syjuco (2011) states, "by creating physical books from digital files, the text further becomes modified, adding a layer of distance, mistranslation, but perhaps also functions as an inadvertent rewriting".

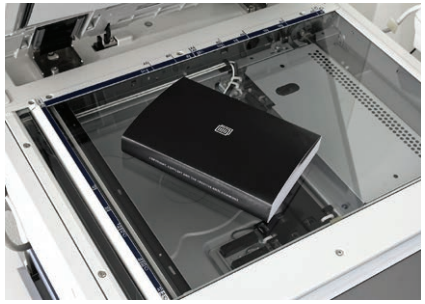
Through the flattening of every element of the interface to linear text, Syjuco highlights the effects of the contexts in which the work circulates: contexts surrounding the text as well as changing its very nature. These contexts are implicitly considered to be a part of the text itself, perhaps even a form of writing rather than a form of rewriting. The booklets are presented on a table with decorative tropical plants, connecting the idea of a domestic, private space to an exotic exploration. This setup indicates the double nature of these text as both a public and private experience. Together with the books, there are "three monitors blink portions of the novel's title, forming a cipher that can be fully legible only after watching it after several minutes" (Syjuco 2011).

PHANTOMS
Spread from one of the Syjuco's versions of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, 2011.
Source: http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_phantoms.html.

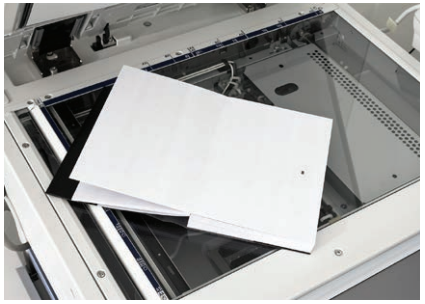
ENACTING NETWORKS

The previous projects highlight some of the effects of the network on texts, effects that can be understood as an ascendancy of paratexts over texts — or frames over content — leading to even question such distinction. On the contrary, the following projects employ strategies that enact networks and, in some ways, 'celebrate' some of the values embedded in them.

C.O.P.Y[8], made by Berlin-based designer Martin Wecke in 2013, is a project developed during a course on "Post-Digital Publishing" held by Martin Conrads and Franziska Morlock (2014) at UDK University. Wecke produced a physical book that appears empty at the human eye, but when it is scanned or photocopied, it reveals the essay "Copyright, Copyleft and the Creative Anti-Commons" attributed to the Neoist avatar Anna Nimus (2006) that explores open distribution, remix, and fluid authorship.



COPY
C.O.P.Y by Martin Wecke, 2013.
Source: http://www.hatsumatsu.de/#/projects/c-o-p-y/.



COPY
C.O.P.Y by Martin Wecke, 2013.
Source: http://www.hatsumatsu.de/#/projects/c-o-p-y/.

The technology adopted, deriving from security printing and taking advantage of the limitations of copy machines, is called 'void pantograph'. Void pantography was developed in order to warrant originality of a document: while certain words are present but invisible on the original document, they appear when the document is photocopied, marking in this way the copied version. The project, employing in an unexpected way a series of technologies that predate the web, performs a certain mode of publishing based on 'peer-to-peer' duplication. The text exists only when is copied, so, in way similar with code and electronic text, it needs execution

COPY
C.O.P.Y by Martin Wecke, 2013. The text appears when the book is photocopied.
Source: http://www.hatsumatsu.de/#/projects/c-o-p-y/.

(cfr. Hayles 2007) to become intelligible. Furthermore, as Wecke (2013) explains, "the text's quality (legibility) gets better with every copy." Such celebration of copying is also expressed by the physicality of the book which is designed to be open flat on the scanner.

FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Reading Room[9] is a 2012 installation by Stephanie Syjuco commissioned by the ZERO1 Art and Technology Biennial. The first part of the installation consists of a wall covered with flyers that include the URLs to download texts illegally uploaded by anonymous users. Visitors pull tabs from the flyers and can then produce their own bootleg physical copy thanks to a production desk that includes a laptop, a printed, and a binder. A bookshelf with printed versions of the texts is also part of the installation. According to Syjuco (2012), "This installation functions as a physical archive, public reading room and actual printing site for texts dealing with the thorny issues of digital copyright,

open source culture, alternatives to capitalism and the state of the intellectual commons in the 21st Century."

Syjuco (2012) also speaks of herself as "artist-as-librarian", since she curates a selection of texts "around the history of the open source movement, creative commons, remix culture, and challenges to copyright in the digital era, [that engage] the public in a lively dialogue of ownership and public access." The work has a clear political stance:

File sharing and copyright infringement—of media, entertainment, creative works, and intellectual property—are hot political and cultural topics in a world increasingly seeking to commodify the production and dissemination of ideas and information. [...] FREE TEXT: The Open Source Reading Room is a space devoted to an urgent and pressing topic that will shape how the future accesses and produces culture.

Like in C.O.P.Y, visitors are invited to perform the publication process and, in doing so, they develop a critical awareness of the topics discussed in the books that are reflected in the material artifacts produced on the site. In this project, the practice of critical making is shared between the artist and the user. The printed books are a physical manifestation of both the topics of the texts and the labor involved in the circulation of content.

FREE TEXTS
FREE TEXTS, Stephanie Syjuco, 2012. Partial installation view.

REFERENCES

[1] In an early definition, the meaning of edition corresponds to publication: “the act of putting forth; making public; publication” (“Edition” 1989).
[2] http://reblog.org/. The team who developed ReBlog in 2002 was composed by Jonah Peretti, Michael Frumin, Michal Migurski, Alex Galloway, Boris Anthony.
[3] Supposedly produced for TV broadcast, the ‘Daniel Pearl Video’ massively circulated through the internet as a compressed file.
[4] http://abcoop.tumblr.com/.
[5] http://libraryoftheprintedweb.tumblr.com/.
[6] http://printingtheinternet.tumblr.com/.
[7] http://www.unibz.it/en/library/welcome/NewsOverview.html?NewsID=76646.
[8] http://www.hatsumatsu.de/#/projects/c-o-p-y/.
[9] http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_freetextsinstallation.html.